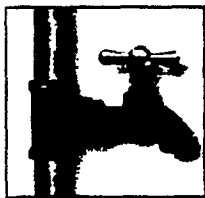


Tapped Out

If water is the source of life, then California's heart is the Bay-Delta. Once teeming with life, the greatest estuary in America's west is now dying of thirst. Do we even know what we're losing?



It was as limitless as the Everglades, and just as spectacularly filled with the rush of millions of wings. It was richer than the gold mines, with an abundance of life that attracted fishermen, trappers, and hunters in droves. In size and uniqueness it was as

miraculous a creation of earth and water as the Grand Canyon.

It was the enormous ecosystem where the freshwater of two of California's biggest river systems, the Sacramento and the San Joaquin, mingled with the salt water of San Francisco Bay to produce a natural wonder: the biggest estuary on the west coasts of both Americas. In 1772, Spanish explorers described it as a "great inland lake that stretched farther than the eye could see, abounding with game, fish, and fowl of all kinds."

And it is gone.

There is still, of course, a Bay-Delta estuary. But it is not what it was. Today the estuary is crippled and impoverished. Dikes have turned the wild marshes into fenced farmland. Siltation and landfill have shrunk the bay. Worse, the rivers have been dammed, the delta has been tapped, and nearly two thirds of the life-giving freshwater that used to flow through the estuary is now sent elsewhere—mostly to irrigate agricultural fields that grow water-intensive crops in an arid climate. The estuary that once brimmed over with life now shelters species on the brink of extinction.

Most Americans have no idea what has been lost in the Bay-Delta. Fewer still know that we may now have a chance to bring some of it back. In the past few years, environmentalists and fishing groups have fought for and won some of the basic protections that should always have been there. Recently, for instance, NRDC and several other organizations won a judgment that the U.S. government must obey environmental laws when doling out water from the Friant Dam, where every year almost the entire flow of the San Joaquin River is trapped and diverted.

And more: there is now a state and federal program, known as CALFED, charged with healing the Bay-Delta. But will California's powerful agricultural sector agree to let more freshwater flow to the bay—the most critical environmental solution?

As the effort proceeds, *Amicus* offers this special section on the Bay-Delta. Robert H. Boyle provides a history of the hydraulic havoc. Glen Martin writes about some encouraging restoration projects. The maps on pages 24 and 25 show what has been lost, and why. Finally, several environmentalists contribute their differing views on what hope there may be for the future. •